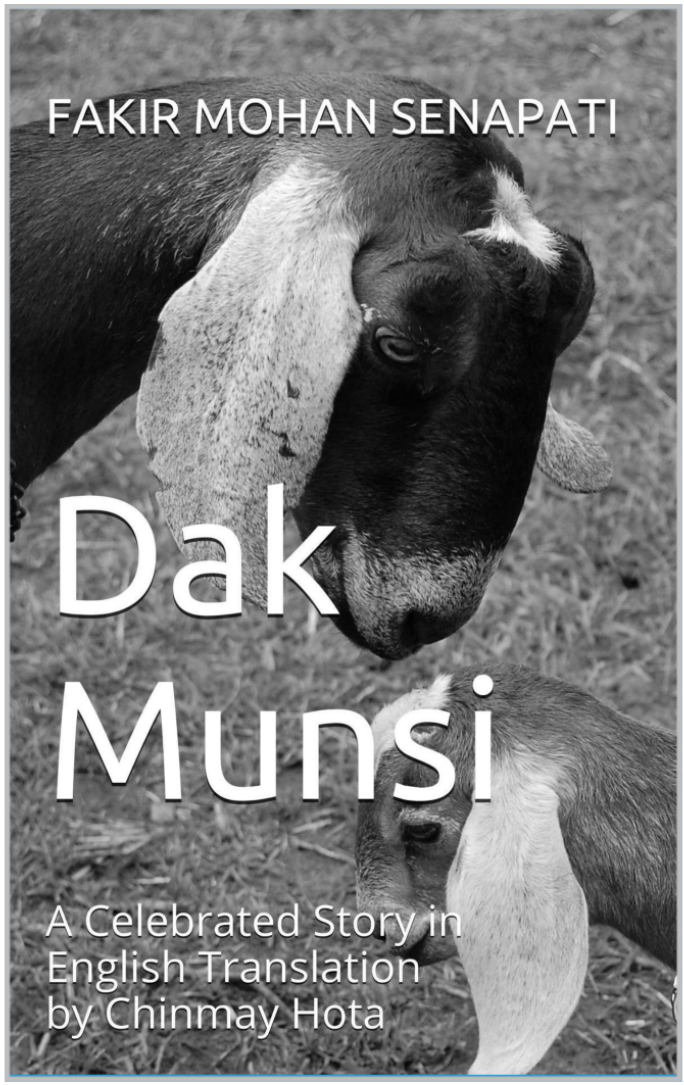
FAKIR MOHAN SENAPATI
Dak Munsi
A Celebrated Story in English Translation by Chinmay Hota

Dak Munsi

Hari Singh had already worked in many mofussil post offices, big and small, since the day of his appointment. For the last ten years, however, he was uninterruptedly performing his duties at the headquarters post office at Cuttack. His sincere work had earned him a promotion. He was now the head peon, receiving a salary of nine rupees a month. Every essential thing at Cuttack had to be paid for – nothing came for free. One could not avoid buying even a match-box if one wished to light a fire. In spite of closely watching his expenses he could not manage with anything less than five rupees a month. He had to send four rupees to his village, where his wife and eight year old son, Gopal lived. They somehow made do with that, but could not manage with even a paisa less. Gopal studied in the upper primary school. His school fee was two annas a month, but when a book or a slate had to be purchased, things really became difficult for Hari Singh. The poor old man had to even go without food at times. But he did not mind as long as Gopal got on with his studies.

One day the postmaster said to him after checking his service book, “Hari Singh, you have completed fifty-five years; you cannot continue in your job any more. You will now receive your pension.” This came as a bolt from the blue for Singh. What would he do to manage things now? Gopal’s schooling would come to a premature end. Singh had a dream since the day of Gopal was born: his son would become a sub-postmaster, at the very least, a village postmaster. But if he could not master a bit of English, landing such an important job would be impossible. English can only be studied at Cuttack, not in a village. If Hari Singh lost his job the at that point, that big hope would remain unfulfilled. He worried himself sick about this and spent sleepless nights.

The Postmaster was very kind to Singh. Even if orderlies were there to do the babu’s bidding, Singh was in the habit of visiting his bungalow to do a few household chores. In the evening, when the babu settled down with the English newspaper, Singh handed him a chillam of tasty delicious tobacco, which others could hardly prepare. One evening, Singh prepared a nice blend of tobacco and blew hard into the concoction before handing the hubble bubble to his superior. Soon the babu began to feel drowsy as he sent out

clouds of smoke like the smokestack of a steam engine. Singh knew that the opportune moment was at hand. He touched the feet of the babu and with folded hands began to describe all his pressing problems very respectfully, very humbly and very tactfully. He did not forget to inform the babu of his high hopes about Gopal. His eyes shut, the babu said in a quiet but grave voice, "Alright. Put all these in an application." The babu was hopeful because his superiors like the postal inspector or the superintendent stayed at his place whenever they came on tour. To ensure their full satisfaction nothing was neglected in the matters of food and drinks. On such visits of the superiors the postmaster would be heard calling 'Hari Singh, Hari Singh' for countless times during the evenings. Hari Singh was an old hand at dealing with the high and mighty. He knew the temperaments and tastes of each of them thoroughly. He would not leave the postmaster's house till the middle of the night: just in case some visitor fell sick due to the disagreeable weather of Orissa and started throwing up. Hari Singh took good care of them by arranging soda and lime. After the babus went to sleep he would return to his house and start cooking for himself late in the night. This way Singh became well known to the superiors.

The postmaster sent the representation to the headquarters after adding his strong recommendations; the order for extension was received in a few days. Singh was beside himself with joy. He immediately conveyed the good news to his family. Those who live in the present get highly worked up about the moment's sorrow or happiness. They do not find it necessary to think of what destiny holds in store for them. Singh's happiness burst like a bubble when he received the news that Gopal's mother was dying of cholera in the village. He showed the letter to the postmaster, who, being a kind man, sanctioned him leave immediately. Singh rushed to his village, where a world of darkness awaited him. The old woman was all but dead. She looked at her husband's face with her dimming eyes, raised her hands slightly in reverence, and begged him for the dust of his feet. It was as if she had waited all along for that speck of precious dust: soon everything came to an end. Singh's world came crushing down. He disposed of the few household articles there were and returned to Cuttack with his son.

Gopal now studied at the middle school. Singh had retired from his

job; he found it very difficult to manage things on his meager pension. He had to sell all his pots and pans just to make ends meet. Even the little money he had kept aside in his savings bank every month while in service had been spent on Gopal's education. Singh had hoped that all his misery would come to an end when Gopal finished his studies. Gopal had also assured him a few times, "Father, borrow money somehow and let me finish my studies. I will repay all the debts once I land a job."

Almighty God, the deliverer of the poor, answered Hari Singh's prayers. Gopal passed his middle school examination, and Singh's happiness knew no bounds. He humbly prayed the postmaster, who was once his superior, for his son's employment. Other higher-ups also showed their sympathy. Gopal secured the job of a sub-postmaster, and was posted at Makrampur sub-post office, with a salary of twenty rupees a month. He would train for four months at the headquarters post office before proceeding to the mofussil area.

Hari Singh basked in the glory of success, and repeatedly showed his obeisance to god saying, "Praise be to your kindness, O God! You have heard the earnest prayers of a destitute." The old man wept a lot in the night sitting in a quiet corner: If the old lady were alive today, she would have jubilantly celebrated the occasion—her own Gopal had got such a high rank and authority after all. The unlucky woman, alas, was not destined to experience the rare joy. Anyway, now that Gopal had risen so high, may the almighty protect him.

Gopal handed his first month's salary to the old man. The old man was in raptures; he could not believe his eyes—his son had earned so much in a month! He counted the notes again and again, before stashing them away in the cloth he was wearing. He went to sleep with the money still tied to his waist. In the morning he ran to the market and purchased shoes, shirts and other necessary cloths for his son, who could not move around wearing anything ordinary now. As the saying goes: one's appearance determines the alms one would get.

Now Gopal babu used only English for his office work, along with other babus. Everyone called him 'Dak Munsi babu', Gopal Chandra Singh being his name in full. However, when he returned home, he found the old man slogging in his dirty clothes, always worrying about Gopal—what he got to eat, what he got to wear, how much

work he did. Earlier the old man spent some time for Harinaam and other spiritual matters, now he had forgotten everything for his son. We presume that the old man's indulgence had annoyed God, who warned him, "You rascal, what are you up to? Just wait and see, what is in store for you."

Gopal babu's behavior had changed a lot. Presently, he found the very sight of his father irksome. The old man was a blockhead, with no knowledge of English; he looked like a menial, and wore dirty clothes—if I addressed him as father others would surely take offence. The other day, the old man passed in front of the educated and fashionable ladies, without wearing even a shirt. What a shame! If he was not thrown out of the house soon, my prestige would be damaged beyond repair.

One day Dak Munsi babu told his father, "Look, you have done nothing good for me. Stay here if you like, or leave if you so desire. But remember; never come out of your room when gentlemen are with me." The old man, greatly shocked to hear the harsh words, somehow managed to sit down. He found himself speechless. To whom would he complain about his own son? The only person he could have shared his grief with was his wife, but she had left him forever. Her memories brought back tears to his eyes and he wept to his heart's content. His moments of sorrow brought back memories of the old woman as did his moments of joy. After a while he stopped crying and wiped his tears realizing that his hurt feelings might prove inauspicious for Gopal.

Gopal Babu would leave for his place of posting in the mofussil tomorrow morning, but he had not told a word about this to the old man. He got up in the morning and said rudely, "Look father, I am on my way to the mofussil; bring all the baggage with you. Mind you, the luggage is light; do not engage any help to carry the lot. If you hire anyone, you will have to settle with him, it is none of my business." The babu, dressed immaculately, his umbrella tucked under his arm, walked away, swirling his stick haughtily. The old man was at a loss, what to do next. He wrapped all the things up and carried the bundle on his head. He could scarcely drag himself along and had to rest several times on the way. His eyes had welled up in tears and his body sapped of all energy by the time he managed to reach Makrampur in the evening. Once home, he sat down for a rest, but the babu was waiting for him to give him a

piece of his mind for the delay.

While the babu attended his office morning and evening the old man silently went about his household chores. No one ever saw the father and son sitting down together for a hearty talk. Dak Munsi was a big official in the locality. Several people came to him daily to pay him respect, but no one bothered to speak to the old man, who was looked upon as an illiterate moron.

The mofussil weather did not suit the old man. Often he had fever, accompanied by cough, which became worse during the nights. The babu's sleep was disturbed by the nasty bout of cough of the old man. He instructed the orderly, "Throw the old haggard at the kia fence." The orderly too was illiterate with no English education; a native heart still beat inside him. He said to himself, "What is this? How can I dump the sick old man on the thorny fence?"

One day the fever of the old man had shot up. He had gone without food for the preceding three days. In the middle of the dark, cold night his cough went out of control. The babu became very angry. He gave two massive English blows on the chest of the old man, and threw his beddings out to the courtyard. That was it! At once the old man left for his village.

People around him have reported that since that day Gopal babu was in good spirits. Back in the village, the old man rented out his two maans of land and received rent in shape of rice. His pension money was enough not only for his household needs, but also for financing his habit of consuming opium which he had picked up of late. He now spent his time reciting Harinaam, sitting at his veranda. Presently both the father and the son are happy. Dear reader, may you be happy by partaking of the happiness of others.